in: 1-Term Administrations (10x)

Defeated Campaigns

VIEW SOURCE

Elections are often hotly contested. Especially when an incumbent is denied of a second term in the White House. Since 1776, **10 US Presidents** were defeated at the polls and **failed to be re-elected to a second term**.

Defeated presidents

This result could be achieved for any reason; usually due to the economy, but foreign/domestic conflict and debates can have a hand in the ultimate undoing.

Thus leaves the defeated lame-duck president confined to a 4-year, 1,461-day term. Martin Van Buren was the only one-term president to attempt re-election, with all others accepting they would never be in that position again.

John Adams

John Adams

The nation's second president was also its first one-termer. He became George Washington's successor based on his laudable career as a lawyer and diplomat. But a series of controversies, including his support of the Alien and Sedition Acts—which many saw as a violation of First Amendment rights—eroded his popularity.

John Adams	
Opponent	Thomas Jefferson
Election	1800
Post-presidency	25 years (d. 90)
Cause of defeat	Opposed Quasi-war Opposed Alien Sedition Acts Rivalled Alexander Hamilton

He lost to Thomas Jefferson in a particularly acrimonious election in 1800. However, the two founding fathers struck up a correspondence in their later years. And, in one of the nation's remarkable coincidences, both men died within hours of each other, 50 years to the day after the Declaration of Independence was signed.

John Quincy Adams

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John Quincy Adams	
Opponent	Andrew Jackson
Election	1828
Post-presidency	19 years (d. 90)
Cause of defeat	Organization

Like his father in 1800, John Quincy Adams failed to repeat his presidential victory four years after making it to the White House. Adams was in some ways a highly consequential statesman, formulating the Monroe Doctrine, which aimed to bolster U.S. influence over the Western hemisphere. Among its core tenets was a willingness to intervene against European powers in any efforts to squash independence movements in Latin America.

However, the sixth president was plagued by accusations of corruption and became a casualty of a shifting political climate. His National Republican party had lost clout during his presidency, and the fact that most states had since shifted to a popular vote of electors, rather than state legislatures, worked in rival Andrew Jackson's favor.

Martin Van Buren

Martin Van Buren

A former secretary of state, Martin Van Buren became the first president who had never been a British subject. The eighth president failed to garner a second term, something that may have had more to do with his predecessor's policies than his own.

Martin Van Buren	
Opponent	William Henry Harrison
Election	1840
Post-presidency	21 years (d. 79)
Cause of defeat	Panic of 1837

Years earlier, President Andrew Jackson had folded the Second Bank of the United States, which some saw as a stabilizing force for the economy. When the financial markets took a downward during Van Buren's first year in office, his White House biography notes, there was little way of controlling inflation. Meanwhile, an expansion westward that was fueled by easy credit meant that many settlers lost their property during the financial panic of 1837 and five years of ensuing depression. Van Buren, who railed against central banks, could do little to stop the economic mess, and he was defeated in 1840 by William Henry Harrison, who died just 32 days into his term.

The only president to make an unsuccessful attempt at winning back the White House, Van Buren actively campaigned but fell short of the 1844 Democratic nomination with an anti-annexation stance over Texas. Van Buren tried again siding with the Free Soil Party in 1848, a coalition of Democrats heavily for annexation, but never got traction in New York to win any electoral college votes.

Benjamin Harrison

Benjamin Harrison

Benjamin Harrison	
Opponent	Grover Cleveland
Election	1892
Post-presidency	8 years (d. 93)
Cause of defeat	High Tariffs High federal spending

Long before Bill Clinton's campaign adopted the informal motto, "It's the economy, stupid," the health of the country's markets often determined the fate of its leaders. That was certainly true of Benjamin Harrison, who presided over a disastrous economic situation during his one term.

Harrison simultaneously advanced protectionist policies (passing the McKinley Tariff Act of 1890) and appeased reformers by breaking up monopolies (signing the Sherman Antitrust Act). Unfortunately for Harrison, the country's woes continued throughout his time in office, with labor strikes making headlines leading up to the election of 1892.

When his wife, Caroline, fell gravely ill, the Republican was unable to campaign extensively; this further diminished his chances.12 Harrison lost his reelection bid to Grover Cleveland, who acquired nearly twice as many electoral votes despite receiving only about 400,000 more popular votes than Harrison.

William Howard Taft

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William Howard Taft	
Opponent	Woodrow Wilson
Election	1908
Post-presidency	17 years (d. 72)
Cause of defeat	3rd party Theodore Roosevelt Unfulfilled agenda

Though the legal profession was more his passion than the world of politics, William Taft became the 27th President of the United States, serving between 1909 and 1913. It was the friendship of his predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt, that helped Taft win the election in 1908. However, his relationship with Roosevelt soured while in office, with his mentor believing Taft fell short of delivering the progressive agenda he had hoped for.

Roosevelt ran as a third-party candidate in the 1912 election, drawing votes away from Taft; in the end, both were defeated by Woodrow Wilson. Taft expressed relief in not having to run the country anymore. But that didn't end the Ohioan's life in the public arena. He went on to become chief justice of the United States in 1921, making him the only person to serve as both president and as a member of the country's highest court.

Herbert Hoover

Herbert Hoover

A former secretary of commerce, Herbert Hoover's promise to continue the economic achievements of the previous decade helped him win the presidency in 1928. His party's pledge ("A chicken for every pot and a car in every backyard") spoke to a deep-seated optimism about the direction of the economy and of the country.

Herbert Hoover	
Opponent	Franklin D. Roosevelt
Election	1932
Post-presidency	31 years (d. 90)
Cause of defeat	Great Depression

All that changed when the stock market crashed immediately after Hoover entered office, leading to the Great Depression. Hoover's inability to stem the economic and financial losses proved disastrous. The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act that he signed into law raised the price of important goods, and his initial unwillingness to let the government interfere with the markets was widely seen as prolonging the economic malaise. With trust in his leadership eroding, he was defeated in the 1932 election by Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Gerald Ford

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Gerald Ford	
Opponent	Jimmy Carter
Election	1976
Post-presidency	19 years (d. 93)
Cause of defeat	Pardoned Nixon

Gerald Ford occupied the White House from 1974 to 1977, but was never elected on a presidential ticket. He became vice president under the 25th Amendment when President Richard Nixon's Vice President, Spiro Agnew, resigned in disgrace. As Agnew's replacement in the order of presidential succession, he ascended to the presidency when the Watergate scandal forced Nixon to resign.

While in office, Ford pardoned Nixon of all crimes committed while president, an enormously unpopular decision. His chances of reelection were further undermined by low economic growth and inflation—a combination known as "stagflation." He went on to lose the 1976 election, garnering 240 electoral votes compared to the 297 that Jimmy Carter attained.

Jimmy Carter

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Jimmy Carter	
Opponent	Ronald Reagan
Election	1980
Post-presidency	43 years (d. 100)
Cause of defeat	V-shaped economic recession

The man who beat Ford in the 1976 presidential campaign didn't fare any better. During his presidency from 1977 to 1981, Jimmy Carter's administration was beset by a torrent of calamities. The nation's continued stagflation was compounded by an energy crisis that caused skyrocketing gas prices and shortages at the pump. At one point, the so-called "misery index"—the unemployment rate plus inflation—reached a previously unthinkable 21.98%.

The former peanut farmer had his share of foreign policy troubles as well. (His important role in brokering a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt notwithstanding.) There was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—which reignited Cold War tensions—as well as the unsuccessful rescue of U.S. hostages in Iran near the end of his term. Carter candidly spoke about the eroding of confidence in the future in what came to be known as his "malaise speech," which may have sealed his fate. He was roundly defeated by Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election, winning just six states and the District of Columbia.

However, Carter has had an unusually active post-presidential career, during which he has promoted peace efforts and diplomacy around the world. He was awarded the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize "for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development."

George H.W. Bush

George H.W. Bush

A little over a year into George H.W. Bush's term, reelection looked almost inevitable. He was given credit for successfully managing foreign affairs after the collapse of the Soviet Union. And he helped amass a vast coalition of countries that liberated Kuwait from an Iraqi invasion. By February of 1991, Bush enjoyed a sky-high approval rating of 89%.

George H.W. Bush	
Opponent	Bill Clinton
Election	1992
Post-presidency	25 years (d. 94)
Cause of defeat	Raised taxes

Unfortunately for the 41st president, it was all downhill from there. His raising of taxes, despite a famous 1988 campaign pledge to do no such thing, eroded trust among conservative voters.

An ill-timed recession late in his presidency—combined with poor debate performances against Democratic challenger Bill Clinton and third-party candidate Ross Perot—proved too damaging to overcome.28 Clinton would go on to garner 370 electoral votes in the 1992 election, compared to just 168 for Bush.

Joe Biden

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Joe Biden	
Opponent	Donald Trump
Election	2024
Post-presidency	*Ongoing* (since 2025)
Cause of defeat	Age and health concerns

When Joe Biden was elected in 2020, he had the highest popular vote total of any presidential candidate to date. A bungled pandemic response, along with public outrage following the murder of George Floyd, allowed him to handily defeat Donald Trump.

Once in office, Biden struggled to accomplish some of his promises. A proposed $15 minimum wage was permanently shelved, and a plan for partial student loan forgiveness was stuck in legal limbo. Meanwhile, consumer prices spiked due to supply chain shortages, causing inflation to peak at over 9%.

But Biden's biggest liability was his advanced age: On the day he took the oath of office, he was already the oldest president in history. Even before his election, skeptics from both parties had asked if Biden's cognitive faculties had diminished, pointing to a worsening stutter and a meandering attention span.

Although party loyalists attempted to downplay his decline, an incoherent appearance at the presidential debates spelled the end of Biden's reelection campaign. Shortly before the Democratic Party convention, Joe Biden dropped out of the race, endorsing Vice President Kamala Harris to run in his stead. With only 107 days remaining, Harris was unable to gain traction among voters, causing Donald Trump to win a second term in office.